



# U.S. COAST GUARD



## Homeland Security

### Flag Voice 257

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#### OTHER THAN ENGLISH AT THE WORKPLACE

This Flag Voice discusses the Coast Guard's policy on the use of languages other than English at the workplace. The changing demographics in the United States and a growing requirement for a global Coast Guard presence make valuing multi-lingual capability more critical than ever. The multi-lingual skills of our workforce are key capabilities that enable us to execute important missions every day. Yet in other contexts, away from the immediacy of those missions, questions have arisen as to whether it is appropriate to speak a language other than English at the workplace. Some may have encountered situations at work where they did not understand the conversation of the people around them. They might have felt excluded or even intimidated by those who conversed in a language other than English. Some have reacted to this by insisting everyone speak English only while at or on the unit. However, this restrictive perspective doesn't foster a work environment that encourages and appreciates the value that multi-lingual capability brings to the Coast Guard. Clearly, we need to have a common policy and understanding on what's appropriate for the use of languages other than English at the workplace.

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As a standard practice, English will be used as the common language when conducting business in the Coast Guard workplace because there is a critical need for clear and effective communications when it comes to mission accomplishment and safety. It is also imperative in promoting unit cohesion, teamwork, and readiness.

While the overwhelming majority of communications occurring throughout the Coast Guard will be conducted in English, there are, and will continue to be, instances where it is acceptable for casual conversations, outside of the immediate work group, to be held in languages other than English. Examples of these include conversations between crewmembers on the mess deck and passageway or in a one-on-one private conversation. Conversations of this nature encourage the development and maintenance of the language skills and cross-cultural exposure and expression that may be critical when conducting Coast Guard missions. However, in an office setting or group situations, English should be used as the common language so that everyone understands what's being communicated and feels included in the process.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to ensure that we recognize and promote the benefits of having a culturally diverse workforce with multi-lingual capability. One way to do this is by allowing members to use their multi-lingual skills in situations outside of conducting Coast Guard business at the unit that doesn't adversely affect mission accomplishment, safety, unit cohesion, teamwork, and readiness. By doing this, we'll be better prepared for missions where these same language skills may be critical to success.

Common sense, good judgment and sound leadership by all are essential to providing a properly balanced work environment that fosters mission

accomplishment, safety, teamwork and unit cohesion, and at the same time, cultivates appropriate opportunities for multi-lingual expression so vital to the long-term effectiveness of the Service.

Regards,

*RADM Kenneth T. Venuto*  
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